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Love that Casteth Out Fear.

A SERMON

BY

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THE LOVE THAT CASTETH OUT FEAR.

“And Jacob swore by the fear of his father Isaac.”—Genesis xxxi., 53.
“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casteth out fear, because fear hath torment.”—I John, iv., 18.

The accusation of those who identify all religion with superstition has always been that religion is essentially fear, and furthermore that fear is unworthy of a human being; that religion, therefore, born of fear and kept alive in fear, must retreat from the emancipated intelligence of man. Religion, it is said, begins in a vague terror, the terror which men have of the dark and of some unseen evil spirit that must be propitiated; and that terror runs all through the history of religious development. Men build altars because they are afraid. The great gods dwell apart, jealous of man. Man must crouch before them, prostrating himself, muttering incantations to win their favor. It goes on through the dark history of sacrifice: first human sacrifice, then the sacrifice of the firstlings of the flock, of the fruits of the field, at last some great propitiation for the sins of the world, in which men must believe or be tormented for their unbelief. It is the dark shadow of a superstitious terror that has been over the race. And, it is said, our forms of worship, when they become rationalized and spiritualized, really are but the survivals of these dark terrors of the night; that we are doing in a little more rational way just what our fathers did, doing this because we are afraid. What is prayer, they say, but

the attitude of a coward? A man is afraid to face the world, afraid that he is not strong enough to do his work, and so he prays to some power, asking that power to do for him what he cannot do himself. What we call worship, interpreted not as petition but as praise,—what is that, they say, but a survival of the same feeling? Did not the Greeks when they spoke of the Furies who tormented men speak of them as the “blessed ones,” speaking softly and beautifully of them; all this praise, just the flattery which one utters to some tyrant of whom he is afraid, speaking well of him that he may gain his favor. Men are afraid to die, afraid to face another world with all its possibilities, and so they find ways to propitiate the powers that rule there. When all this passes away, when man stands free and erect, fearing no longer the powers of the darkness or of the light, then prayer and worship and all that goes with them, must fade away.

Now what shall we say to that assertion? I think the first thing to be said is that it has behind it a certain historic warrant, that as a matter of fact religion does begin in fear. It begins with the race in fear, and I am inclined to think in its greater manifestations as a power, it begins in the individual in fear. And the man who has not been afraid of something, shrunk from something in terror, does not know either its depths or its heights. We go back in the history of any religion and we find the place where it is almost all fear. Read the story in Genesis of the religion of Abraham, how when the sun went down the horror of the great darkness came upon him, and out of that horror of the great darkness came his religion, his sense of the unseen powers.

We read of the struggles of the patriarchs with the power in the night, wrestling there until the day dawned. We read again this story of Jacob swearing a great oath by "the fear of his father Isaac," that is the thing which his father Isaac feared.

Religion has begun in fear and it begins today in fear also. The question is, is there any rational justification of that fear? There are those who preach a smooth gospel, a gospel, as they think, of perfect love and perfect optimism. There are those who are content to sink into a fatalistic pessimism to whom all fear is irrational. There are two assumptions which we may make in regard to this world which make anything like fear, as a motive to which we may appeal altogether unreasonable. If this be a world so good that no evil can happen to us, then of course there is nothing to fear; on the other hand, if this world be a world in which we cannot help ourselves, if all the evil that comes is inevitable, if it is merely a great machine and we the wheels in this machine, going round and round without will of our own, fear also is irrational. Then the ideal man is the man without sensitiveness, the man who never shrinks back from anything, never is appalled by any possibility, who simply deadens his soul, all his loves and all his hopes. The savage, then, who simply accepts the situation is the ideal man.

I believe that this is neither a world so good, nor a world so bad as that; and because it is neither so good nor so bad, fear has a rational place in it. We shrink back from some things, try to avoid them because we *can* avoid them. We are appalled at certain things and

we suffer at the sight of them because this instinct that is within us is for our good. We can escape impending evil if we see it in time. I do not see how any one can face human life without being afraid of some things he sees. I cannot see how any one, looking upon those who are beginning this life here, does not want to make them afraid, sometimes, of evils which threaten, but which may be avoided. The absolute lack of fear, the easy acquiescence in whatever comes,—that is, after all, the greatest danger, that is the condition of decay and moral loss.

“There is no fear in love!” If the writer is speaking of the beginnings of love, that is not true. No fear in love? Why it is just because we love something that we are afraid. Show me a man who does not love his life—and there are such men—he has nothing to be afraid of. Show me a person of undeveloped intelligence and conscience—what has he to be afraid of in the world? But let him begin to love something, to see something supremely beautiful, something supremely desirable, both in his life and in the life of others, then it is that he begins to be afraid; because, as he sees this dear object of his love, he sees the things which threaten it—death and pain and loss. The lover is afraid, the father and the mother are afraid, having new fears as they look upon the world. We say those who have families give hostages to fortune; that is to say, they no longer can face the world so carelessly as they faced it before because they know what is involved in living. Can you face what you see without a certain terror? Can any one live to mature life without knowing what Dante

meant in telling of those strange journeys through hell and through purgatory? We have seen the lost souls driven in frightened flocks before the wind. We have seen the victims of passion, the victims of their own selfishness, victims of lust and greed, we have seen that which is even more terrifying to some of us than all this. We have seen the way it is possible for a human life to grow smaller and meaner as the years go on. We have seen middle age and old age taking terrible forms before us, a man losing year by year his grip upon moral principle, losing his interest in the great world, losing his hope, as if the years made for him a narrow prison house; and we have cried, Who shall deliver us from the body of this death of which we may well be afraid!

Did you ever see any one do any worthy work without some such fear? Go into the laboratory of the man of science and see how he works, how careful of details, how he repeats day after day the same experiments and is not satisfied,—and why? He is afraid of something which you are not afraid of, he is afraid of the possibility of error. So with endless patience and caution he goes over and over again with his work that he may avoid that danger.

See the modern surgeon, as he goes about his work. How careful he is, more careful than any priest of the olden time was for ceremonial cleanliness. How few chances he takes. Whence this care? Because he knows, as those who went before him did not know, the real, hidden danger that may come even through his presence if he does not take care to avoid it.

Caution, wisdom—do not these have one source? Is

it not true of every great undertaking that a certain fear is the beginning of its true wisdom? So it must ever be. He that is beginning to love has the torments of fear. It is only when we turn from the beginning to the end, from the immature to the mature, that we begin to see what was meant by the New Testament writer. Granted that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, it is not the end of it, for perfect love casteth out fear. We are looking at a spiritual progress, an inevitable process, beginning in that which is low, and apparently almost cowardly, bringing the man at last to the true temple of self-respect and the true liberty of the sons of God. It is only when we reverse that process that we get into trouble, priding ourselves on our fearlessness before we have learned to have that within us which shall justify our fearlessness. It is only a great, pervading love in the man's own heart that takes the place after a while of fear and does the work which merely prudential considerations can never do. We find that wherever men are earnest they are at first fearful. At last they grow into fearlessness which is justified by their own experience, and it is because at last they come to have the power that can really make them stand alone and overcome the evil with an inner good.

It is possible for one to go through life and feel always a terror about it and its possibilities. I am loving, but the thing I love is transitory. I am hoping, but the thing I hope for may be an illusion. I am working, but the thing I am working for may be the thing which the whole order of the universe is working against. How can we get emancipation? In some

deeper faith that makes us, in our heart of hearts believe that these fears of ours are groundless, that makes us feel that our heart's loves shall meet us again and be with us unto the end ; that they are no whims of ours, no illusions, but the bits of clear seeing into an eternal reality.

That is what religion means at its highest. It recognizes the things we fear. It says that each one of us has something within strong enough to overcome these things, eternal even as the heavens. Out of the man's fear, out of his aimless wandering, out of his bitter disappointment, grows at last this high, serene and perfect love. It is just as natural as the growing of the flowers, the thing toward which every true and pure heart is moving, the time when it begins to trust itself and trust itself in God's own world.

That is what the truth-seeker does. First he is afraid of an error, running away from something because that something is evil, at last loving the truth utterly for itself, following it wherever it leads. That is what love of righteousness means ; first, prudential, afraid to do this and afraid to do that, and building around itself a hedge of commandments that may keep the evil off ; afraid of that which threatens its own soul. At last we see men, few perhaps, but a growing number, who are not so much afraid to do wrong as having a great manly love of that which is right ; men enamored of the beauty of holiness, of the sublimity of righteousness. These men are no longer on the defensive. They go into the city's slums, they face evil in its most alluring forms, they battle with the complications of the modern life,

and they are not afraid. Why should they be? That within them has grown strong enough for the victory. They hear the words of Jesus: "Fear not. I have overcome the world," and so they overcome the world. These are men who do not care to hide behind pious illusions. They face the stern aspects of the world. The man of the world can tell them nothing of the evil that is in it, nor can the man of the world make them doubt the triumph of the good. It is not the fear of evil but the love of right that makes the strong reformers, and yet, through fear, they have grown to this perfect love.

We love him because he loved us. As he is, so are we in this world. The time comes, and that is the culmination of the moral struggle, when the man no longer fears the world, because he feels that he is in the world a living soul, just as God is in the world a living soul. He conceives of this living soul that loves righteousness yet pervades a world still imperfect, loves it not only with an ardent love, but with a patient love, loves it not for what it is to be only, but for what it is and for what it is becoming. So there may be men in the world, living in it and working in it with a patience, joy and love that is divine. It is through such men that we believe in God. Loving those whom we have seen, we come to love that power within them that is unseen. What can separate us from that love, things present, or things to come, life or death or any other thing? We have seen that in the human soul, the soul that loves unto the end, there is that which is infinitely greater than anything which we have ever feared.



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